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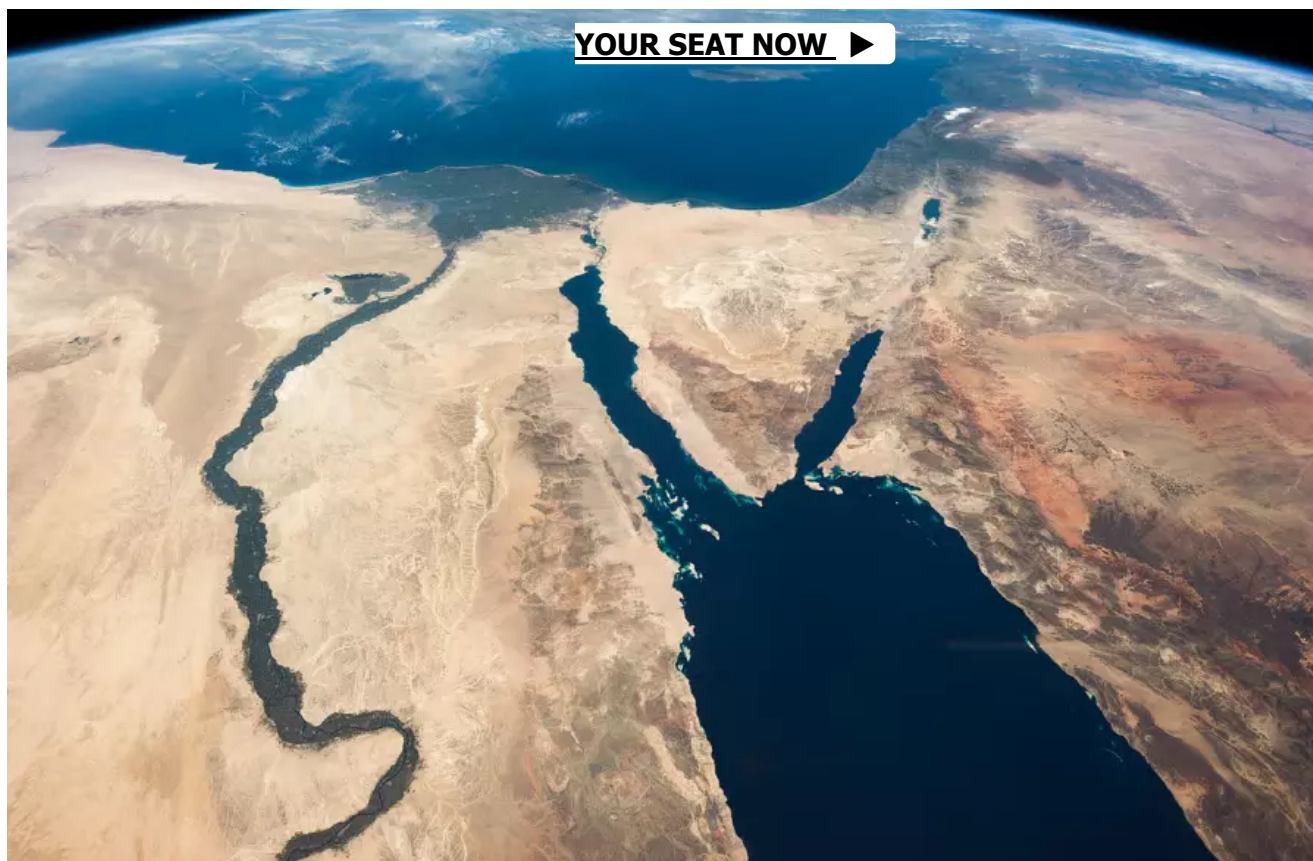
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What will Middle East studies do without Alwaleed bin Talal?

By A.J. CASCHETTA
March 21, 2018 21:20
4 minute read.

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Satellite view of Israel and the Middle East. (photo credit: COURTESY NASA/PUBLIC DOMAIN)

Last November, when the crown prince and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), arrested dozens of wealthy royals and businessmen, many were stunned to learn that his cousin Alwaleed bin Talal was among those charged with corruption. Few have as much to lose from bin Talal's misfortune as the Middle East studies industry, which has profited handsomely from his "activist philanthropy."

According to one 2004 estimate, since the 1970s Saudi Arabia has spent "north of \$75 billion" on dawa – that is, on spreading Wahhabi Islam to non-Muslim societies. Many millions went to American colleges and universities willing to assist the kingdom. That they accepted the money is clearly a conflict of interests. Would they have accepted money from the Vatican to promote Catholicism? Or from the Soviet Union to promote communism?

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In 2003 Alwaleed bin Talal became the face of the Saudis' academic dawa when he went on what Martin Kramer called an "academic shopping spree" in search of cooperative scholars who shared his ideals.

At the root of bin Talal's problem is the ambitious Saudi reform package called Vision 2030. MbS claims it will stamp out corruption and transform the kingdom into "a country of moderate Islam that will be open to all." If his reform efforts are genuine, it's unlikely he'll approve of continued funding to promote the militant, anti-American, anti-Israel version of Islam bin Talal has financed. And if the anti-corruption element of the reforms are just MbS's way to steal the wealth from his competitors, bin Talal may never regain the influence he enjoyed prior to his arrest.

After three months' detention, bin Talal paid a \$6b. fine and was released, but he has not traveled since and has stopped giving interviews. This has led to a great deal of conjecture everywhere except for academia, where few are talking.

The press speculates that bin Talal is not really free at all and is closely watched. *The New York Times* reports that he no longer controls his Kingdom Holding Company, while the *Daily Mail* quotes an insider who advises not to "buy the c**p of Alwaleed being treated right," and claims that he will never be allowed to travel again.

Financial publications wonder about the fate of bin Talal's fortune. In 2013, Bloomberg estimated his net worth at \$27b. Last week *Forbes* removed him (and all Saudis) from its 2018 Billionaires List.

But in academia, it's mostly quiet, especially from the recipients of bin Talal's largesse. In 2005 he gave \$20 million each to Harvard and Georgetown. Harvard created the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Islamic Studies Program, and Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service

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unable to find any official statement from either Harvard or Georgetown. I reached out to both, asking if they had experienced or were anticipating negative effects from their patron's arrest, **YOUR SEAT NOW** ► e on the corruption charges levied against him.

At Georgetown's bin Talal Center, someone identifying herself only as "Anastasia" confirmed that neither the university nor the center had issued a statement, and replied "no comment" to all other questions.

There has been no statement from John Esposito, founding director of Georgetown's bin Talal Center, though he tweeted two articles criticizing MbS for "torturing" and humiliating the detained royals. One of those articles was written by Mehdi Hasan, an adjunct professor at the Georgetown bin Talal Center. Jonathan A.C. Brown, the current director of the center, attempted a half-hearted defense of his benefactor when he told the student newspaper that MbS's reform efforts are really "just cover for the Crown Prince to consolidate power and remove competition."

Calls to Harvard's bin Talal Center went unanswered. Emailed questions to the university and the Islamic studies program went unanswered. Only William A. Graham, professor of Middle Eastern studies and director of Harvard's bin Talal Program, responded: "I'm afraid we have no basis for comment."

Their predicament invites silence. The Vision 2030 reforms may indeed be just a smokescreen enabling MbS to pose as a moderate, telling the West what he knows it wants to hear while consolidating power. Then again when he becomes king, he too might go on a shopping spree, and convert bin Talal Centers into bin Salman Centers. No one wants to offend a potential donor.

Whatever the motivation behind MbS's reforms, it seems clear that with bin Talal's fall from grace academia has lost a major revenue source. Perhaps it's a coincidence that another of its donors detained in November is Abdallah Salah Kamel, a Saudi banker whose name appears on the so-called "Golden Chain List" of al-Qaida donors found in Bosnia in 2000. In 2015 Kamel gave Yale Law School \$10m. to establish the Abdallah S. Kamel Center for the Study of Islamic Law and Civilization.

Islamic studies programs, Islamic law centers and Muslim-Christian interfaith dialogue institutes at American universities may just have to emulate their British counterparts and seek funding from the Islamic Republic of Iran. It worked out well for Cambridge University. Doing so shouldn't pose any ethical problems since the Middle East studies industry almost unanimously approved of Obama's nuclear deal with Iran.

Perhaps the mullahs will someday go on their own academic shopping spree and establish Ayatollah Khomeini Centers at American universities.

The author is a senior lecturer at the Rochester Institute of Technology and a fellow at Campus Watch, a project of the Middle East Forum, where he is a Shillman-Ginsburg fellow.

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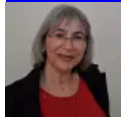
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